

**Review of the book *Teaching what really happened: How to avoid the tyranny of textbooks and get students excited about doing history* by J. W. Loewen**

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**Abstract:**

In the sequel to his bestseller, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, James Loewen has crafted a critique of how history is being taught in public education that should be in the hands of every practicing and pre-service social studies teacher in the United States. Using a writing style aimed at practitioners, Loewen divides *Teaching What Really Happened* into two distinct sections. The introduction and first four chapters discuss the sociological power of history, the numerous limitations of textbooks and standardized tests in teaching and assessing history in public schools, the pedagogical value of historiography, and the rationale for having students "do" history rather than simply learn about it. In the final six chapters, Loewen puts these lessons into a practical context by offering detailed explanations of ways teachers can use these strategies to teach historical topics that are often depicted in the classroom as factually inaccurate and rooted within subliminally racist or paternalistic ideologies.

**Keywords:** book review | U.S. history | social studies | public education | textbooks

**Article:**

**\*\*\*Note: Full text of article below**

Codman died following seven doses of arsenic, and after a brief trial, Mark was found guilty and executed, his body left hanging in irons. Terrified of the women who cooked their dinners, the magistrates ordered one of Mark's female accomplices burned alive, and the other was resold into the Caribbean. Twenty years later, as Paul Revere galloped westward to warn militia companies of the arrival of British forces, he may have noticed Mark's rotting body, still swinging in its gibbet.

With the coming of freedom, Concord's black residents quit their former masters' relatively dispersed farms and homes, choosing to build their shanties as closely together as squatting arrangements in the woods permitted. Whether this arrangement was due to dimly recalled African housing practices or the need of impoverished people to band together in the name of survival, Concord's tiny free black population proved less willing to remain in their former owners' homes as live-in domestics than were freed people in Philadelphia. Either way, black life near the pond remained harsh. White residents of the village, for example, boasted mortality rates better than the overall rates of whites across the new nation. Former slaves living in the woods, however, lost children at an alarming rate due to malnourishment, disease, and dysentery. Jack Garrison lost half of his children, while fellow freedman Peter Hutchinson buried all of his. When young black men gave up on the region and moved to Boston or Philadelphia, it diminished an already limited marriage pool. Black veteran Brister Freeman died an old man in early 1822; when his eight-year-old grandson John died eighteen days later, the Freeman family vanished from Concord.

Ultimately, *Black Walden* reveals both the virtues and vices of microhistory. As impressive as is Lemire's encyclopedic knowledge of the people who tramped Walden's woods, her monograph rarely wanders far from the confines of Concord Village or addresses larger questions of race and freedom in the early national North. Early on, Lemire insists that the "gradual end" of slavery in Massachusetts has "long confounded historians" (p. 10), and much later she adds that still other scholars "imagin[e] that slaves received their freedom in exchange for their military service" (p. 108). Lemire never mentions who any of these unnamed scholars might be, even in her endnotes. Although she is certainly right in arguing that Massachusetts slaveholders were rarely more egalitarian-minded than their Virginia counterparts, neither does she explore the correlation between Revolutionary ideology and the region's miniscule black population that allowed New England to eradicate slavery in the wake of the conflict. Nor does Lemire even mention the two interconnected court cases launched by Quok Walker and Elizabeth Freeman that all but abolished slavery in Massachusetts.

Lemire also makes some peculiar editorial choices. Not wishing to bestow "more authority and respect" on Thoreau or the other whites who later populated the village than on its earlier black inhabitants, she consistently refers to adults by their forename only (p. 14). For example, even after bondman Brister achieved his liberty and adopted the surname of Freeman, he here remains Brister, a stylistic decision that not only diminishes one of the most important decisions Freeman ever made, but erases the power dynamic that allowed whites to deny adult bondpersons the dignity of a surname.

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*Teaching What Really Happened: How to Avoid the Tyranny of Textbooks and Get Students Excited About Doing History*, by James W. Loewen. New York:

Teachers College Press, 2010. 248 pages. \$21.95, paper.

In the sequel to his bestseller, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, James Loewen has crafted a critique of how history is being taught in public education that should be in the hands of every practicing and pre-service social studies teacher in the United States. Using a writing style aimed at practitioners, Loewen divides *Teaching What Really Happened* into two distinct sections. The introduction and first four chapters discuss the sociological power of history, the numerous limitations of textbooks and standardized tests in teaching and assessing history in public schools, the pedagogical value of historiography, and the rationale for having students “do” history rather than simply learn about it. In the final six chapters, Loewen puts these lessons into a practical context by offering detailed explanations of ways teachers can use these strategies to teach historical topics that are often depicted in the classroom as factually inaccurate and rooted within subliminally racist or paternalistic ideologies.

While these specific examples are useful in that they show how teachers can make history an active and engaging process for students while simultaneously demystifying the traditional narrative found in most textbooks, the real value of Loewen’s book is in the larger themes that permeate throughout. In particular, the two that I believe carry the most beneficial messages for social studies teachers are the notions that teachers have an obligation to portray history as it actually happened and that learning to think historically is considerably more important than ascertaining mass amounts of historical knowledge. Both of these themes are central to any attempt to drastically change the way students learn and understand history, particularly in this era of increased educational accountability in the United States.

In this aptly named critique of history education, Loewen urges teachers to teach from a standpoint of what really happened, rather than the romanticized tales of American white male superiority that are often portrayed in textbooks and state curriculum standards. History, at least the way it is commonly taught in public education, is based as much on myth as it is on fact. The problem is that these myths are so commonly repeated in our culture that they have become “facts” that teachers feel they *have* to teach. Loewen suggests using these widely held beliefs as a way of engaging students and getting them to “do” history. However, this strategy requires teachers move their instruction beyond acquisition of facts and dates and engage their students in historiography, the systematic analyzing of history practiced by historians. In a particularly illustrative example, Loewen dissects the transformation of John Brown from a clean-cut businessman to a crazed mad man—nearly 50 years after his death! Loewen then describes how teachers can have their students discover what “really happened” through common historical methods, such as oral histories, research, and primary source analysis, all of which can subsequently be compared with students’ textbooks to highlight the interpretive nature of history.

Perhaps the most salient aspect of Loewen’s argument is his discussion of broad historical topics (which he calls “trees”) versus memorization of disconnected historical facts (which he calls “twigs”). Loewen states that teachers should focus less on twigs and more on trees, and he goes so far as to say that teachers only need to teach thirty to fifty personally selected trees in any given course. Of course, this method of selectively choosing topics for coverage contradicts the entire notion of standardization, which relies on students demonstrating broad knowledge of twigs on end-of-course tests. Loewen contends that students need to go beyond twigs in order to appreciate history, and teachers are more likely to achieve student engagement if students develop the skills of historiography, which can only occur if there is sufficient time devoted to each tree.

This differentiation between twigs and trees may be both the most useful and prob-

lematic aspect of Loewen's argument. While reading this book, I kept thinking about the students in my methods classes who are often quick to be skeptical of any lofty pedagogical goals that do not provide clear explanations of *how* teachers can be expected to teach in a way that both engages students and prepares them for end-of-course tests. To his credit, Loewen offers suggestions on how to bridge this gap in the classroom and with school administrators, but I am not sure these suggestions would satisfy my harshest skeptics. This book, however, is about possibility, not typicality, and even adopting a few of Loewen's ideas would make any history classroom exceedingly vibrant and, more importantly, accurate.

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*Pashas: Traders and Travellers in the Islamic World*, by James Mather. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009. 320 pages. \$35.00, cloth.

*Pashas* is a monograph designed to partially fill a gap in Western scholarship between the early modern and post-Napoleonic/Industrial Revolution eras (16<sup>th</sup>-early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) in the history of interaction between the West (largely Great Britain) and the Ottoman Empire, and is loosely configured around the history of The Levant Company, which was chartered by Queen Elizabeth I in 1581 as England's first systematic attempt to carry out trade with the Ottoman Empire. Mather writes, "the main concern is to reconstruct the everyday existence of Britons living there [in the Ottoman Empire], the commerce in which they became engaged and their interactions with the wider society that they found. In doing so, the broader contours emerge of their relationship with the Ottoman world" (p. 12).

The book is divided into sections entitled with the four most important cities in the Ottoman Empire: an introduction starting in Jerusalem, and then three parts titled, respectively, Aleppo, Constantinople, and Alexandria. The chapters within the Aleppo section deal with the beginnings of British trade with the Ottoman Empire, the nature of and demand for the goods traded, the early history of the Levant Company, and the practice of apprenticeships, the perils of travel to the region, and the early challenges of expatriate communities resident in the city. The Constantinople section deals with the later period of more established trade, the political events and intermittence between the Ottoman Empire and Europe, the close associations of trading companies with capitulation agreements and ambassadorial missions to the Ottoman government, and a final chapter that considers Grand Tourism and Enlightenment dabbling in Middle Eastern philosophical (but seldom religious) ideas found on manuscripts that eventually ended up in the Bodleian Library at Oxford University. The final and most brief section, which could be better organized and thus a bit less redundant, centers on Alexandria and discusses the twilight years of British trade with the Ottomans, the challenges of expanding that trade to North Africa, competition with the East India Company as well as other European countries (mainly France), inclinations to more military actions than previously done, and finally the paradigmatic shift brought on by Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798. The end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century signaled a change in both the economic and political relations between Britain and the Ottoman Empire and indicated the beginnings of the imperialistic attitudes and military aspirations of the Europeans (including the British) that would come to be the hallmark of relations by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The book concludes with an epilogue more focused on India than on the Middle East, perhaps attempting to indicate